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The News-Sentinel

Floodwaters test \$50 million dike project  
**It is falling short in areas along St. Marys.**  
**By Cindy Larson**  
**of The News-Sentinel**

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When Fort Wayne's \$50 million diking project was completed in 2001, Mayor Graham Richard said, "We can feel a bit more comfortable now."

What a difference two years can make.

While the diking seems to be working in areas hardest-hit in the 1982 flood, such as Lakeside, it doesn't seem to be helping neighborhoods along the St. Marys River.

Despite that, the new diking system is "working wonderfully," said Kim Schieferstein, the city's flood-control coordinator. She sees the St. Marys flooding here as inevitable because of the sheer volume of water flowing into the city from the south.

"Never in the history of Decatur has the city ever endured a flood like this," she said. "There's no way we're *not* going to be hit by it - we are part of the basin to the St. Marys River."

The St. Marys crested at 26.92 feet Wednesday in Decatur - the highest level ever recorded.

Even if it hadn't rained in Fort Wayne, "We would still have minor flooding from all the water flowing in here from the south," Schieferstein said.

She said many southern Fort Wayne neighborhoods that border the St. Marys are "outside the scope of the flood-control project."

Rodney Renkenberger, director of the Maumee River Basin Commission, agreed that relentless



News-Sentinel photo by [Brian Tombaugh](#)

### Temporary floodgate

Benchmark Construction employees Alonzo Drennon, left, and Jeremy Martin carry a section of a metal wall that they will bolt to other panels to serve as a temporary floodgate on Elizabeth Street, just east of North Clinton Street. The floodgate was placed to keep Spy Run Creek from backing up into the neighborhood.

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rain, especially in Adams County and western Ohio, is a big part of the problem, but he doesn't blame Fort Wayne's flooding entirely on the weather.

He believes the diking project could have something to do with it, although he said, "Engineers probably will argue with me on this point.

"When you confine floodwaters within dike walls it has no other alternative but to rise in elevation and increase in velocity," he said.

When the dikes were raised after the 1982 flood, "That water that spewed over in '82 can't spew over now," he said.

Renkenberger invoked a law of physics to illustrate his point: "When you confine things and squeeze them together . . . for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction."

Schieferstein disagreed with Renkenberger.

"Remember, these levees already were in place," she said. "(The corps) raised them to a 100-year level of flood protection."

The '82 flood, which caused \$55 million in damages and forced the evacuation of about 1,800 homes and 9,000 residents, was the impetus for the Fort Wayne-Allen County Flood Control Project, which was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

More than 10 miles of earthen levees and concrete flood walls along the city's three rivers are supposed to protect residents from a 100-year flood, providing up to two feet of additional protection from floodwaters that reached nearly 26 feet in 1982.

The project now protects 4,000 homes and businesses hit in 1982, as well as 1978, Schieferstein said.

The diking was the most important part of a multipronged effort to reduce flooding in Fort Wayne. It supplemented an \$8.7 million widening of the Maumee River, which has helped drop river crests by excavating 1.14 million cubic yards of riverbank along a four-mile stretch on the north side of the Maumee.

And the \$16.9 million Headwaters Park project transformed into parkland a 30-acre flood-prone area along the downtown "thumb" of the St. Marys.

Although designed to be a flood overflow area, Headwaters Park, particularly on the east side, wasn't full of floodwater Wednesday. Schieferstein speculated that's because most of the flooding on the St. Marys has been concentrated upstream.

"From my perspective . . . Headwaters Park is doing exactly what it's supposed to do," said Geoff Paddock, director of the park.

## **A look at flooding**

"Generically, water is going to take the path of least resistance," said Renkenberger, a certified flood-plain manager. "If an elevation is higher than the water-surface elevation, is it going to get

flooded?"

Development on flood plains is another big factor in flooding, Renkenberger said. As a flood manager, he said he would like to see nonstructural solutions explored: "We need to quit developing in flood plains."

While the Army Corps of Engineers tries to fix the problem by building up the levees, he seeks a more regional solution, although he said his vision is "probably viewed as trying to stymie development."

Schieferstein said the city is learning a lot from this flood, which is considered the first major test of the new diking. For example, floodgates - the city calls them stop logs - are being used for the first time in several areas.

After floodwaters recede, Schieferstein could approach the Army Corps to see if more flood-control efforts are feasible farther south on the St. Marys.

The corps would first study the viability of such a project, then conduct hydrologic testing, then have to prove any diking would not adversely affect other neighborhoods in the area.

It would be years before construction could start, she said.

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